

# Innovations

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## CORPO IN MOVIMENTO... THE BODY IN MOTION

by Paola Cavazzoni, Barbara Pini, Francesca Porani and Annalisa Renieri

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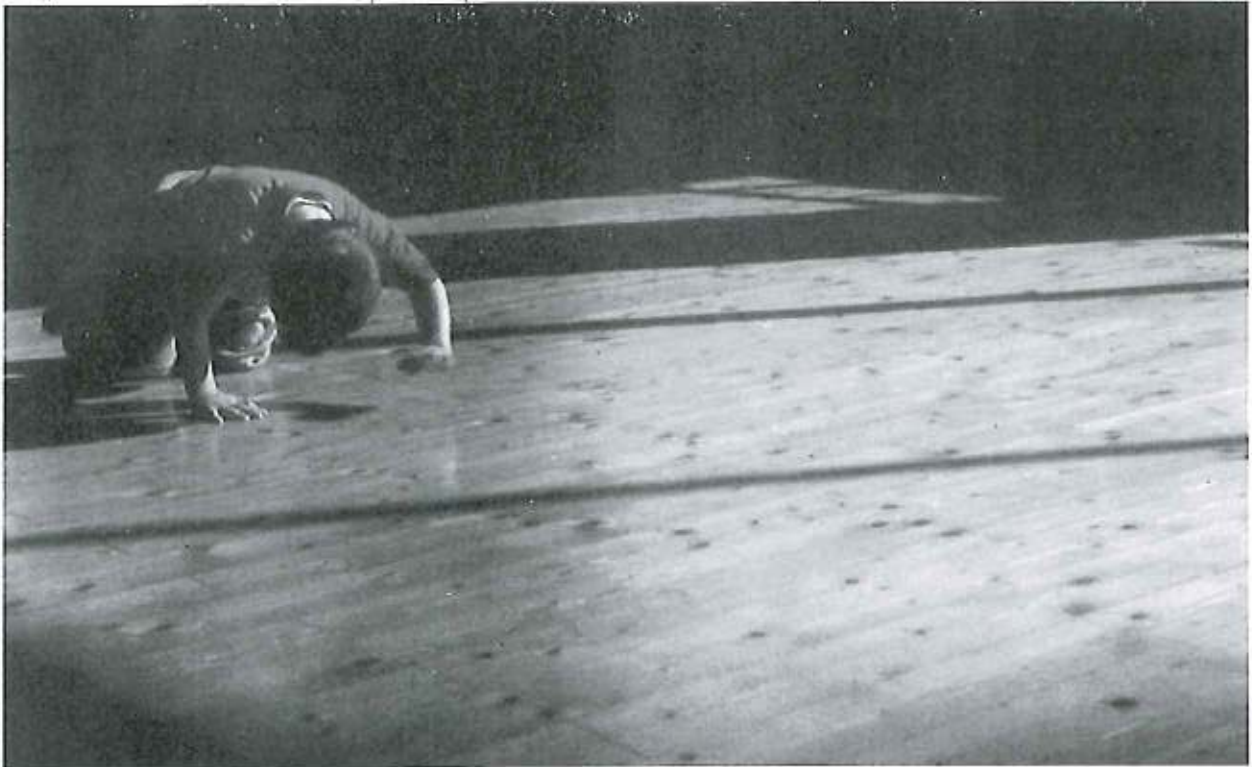
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The following article is based on two presentations about a movement project with the four and five year-old children at Choreia Infant-Toddler Center and Preschool. One presentation highlighted the origins and philosophical/pedagogical considerations of this project, and was given by Paola Cavazzoni and Barbara Pini for a delegation of Swedish educators in May 2006. The other presentation, which described the evolution of the

movement project into the language of dance, was given in May 2005 by Paola Cavazzoni, Barbara Pini, Francesca Porani and Annalisa Renieri. The Choreia Infant-Toddler Center and Preschool is one of the services of the Panta Rei Social Cooperative, which was featured in an article in the Winter 2007 issue of Innovations. The name "Choreia" means "choral dance" in Greek and was chosen, in part, because of the interest of the Choreia educators in movement and dance. Paola Cavazzoni is a pedagogical coordinator for the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, and worked with the Choreia educators during the school's first four years. Barbara Pini is the atelierista at Choreia, and has training and experience in the field of dance. Francesca Porani is a teacher at Choreia and Annalisa Renieri was a university student who did her thesis on this movement project. Following this article is an interview with Paola Cavazzoni, Barbara Pini and Francesca Bianchi, which took place in May 2006. Francesca Bianchi is the pedagogical coordinator at Choreia Infant-Toddler Center and Preschool.

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Through the encounter of children with movement and dance, our intention was to observe children in situations when they explored the expressivity of their bodies. Through our observations, we learned that the language of the body enriches knowledge. We learned that movement and dance could promote learning of other languages, such as writing and mathematics.

It is not by chance but by choice that these experiences developed in the space of an infant-toddler center and preschool rather than in a gymnasium. It has been very valuable to give a new quality to the infant-toddler center and preschool as laboratories, not only for discoveries of thought but also for the

language of the body. We brought the language of the body into projects, into the experimental context and the physical context of the school. Dialogues among teachers and parents contributed to the evolution of this initiative.

These experiences prompted us to re-consider our environment, our didactic work and new possibilities of research around children and dance. Furthermore, this exploration has also given more awareness to the children about listening to their own body. We tried to deepen our observation of the language of the body and the expressive modalities that the children use. Our way of looking as educators has influenced the choices we made with children and with parents.

We began to consider the body of children as the bearer of multiple aspects of knowledge and possibilities for learning. We considered the relationship of pedagogy with different fields of knowledge in the cultural and artistic sphere, but also in the field of sciences. Among the latter, we considered the contributions of neuroscience with the guidance of a professor from the University of Rome. This has been a project steeped in pedagogical and scientific theories, which concluded with a choreography, inspired by the movements of the children.

This project was based on various theses, one being *the music of the body*. We considered the connection of some aspects of the body in relationship with the environment and with music. We posed questions to ourselves about analyzing gestures and movements. In particular, we acquired new sensitivity in observing the movement in the space of the very young child, which we tried to read as kinetic melodies. These melodies are born with life itself, with the heartbeat and the rhythm of the body. We looked and observed the body in the harmony of movement. The body is rich with rhythm and capable of giving life to melodies. The skin of the body collects the vibrations of the environment. One can feel the music of the body in the movement of the child's body in space; it is part of a poetic expression.

### *The body and the experience of the hundred languages of children*

There was already research in process in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia related to the hundred languages of children, to the many forms of expression through which children are capable of learning and interacting. We, as educators, do not believe in the traditional division of mind versus body. We choose, rather, to live harmoniously with both body and mind. Through this experience at Choreia, we began to consider that the mind is formed by movement, by the movement of the body. In fact, we began to think of the body as mind. If one makes this assumption, his or her ethical and political point of view changes. Thinking in terms of the education of body and mind influences the structure of thought.

The theory of the hundred languages is based on the need and importance of interaction, and assumes solidarity among different fields of knowledge, emotions and languages, giving crucial importance to

relationship and communication. Through this approach, we have developed diverse experiences and research, lived with the passion and strong belief in a competent child, respected for his or her uniqueness and subjectivity. In his poem, Loris Malaguzzi puts forth the idea of a child that does not want to separate head from body, hands from thinking, reason from imagination. Malaguzzi is in favor of a whole child, who experiences and learns with all of his or her being. We also consider a child who is competent because he or she has a body that knows how to speak and listen, in fact, a body that gives identity to the child and with which the child gives identity to the world around him or her.

### *The body in relationship with the space*

The bodies of young children maintain a very close relationship with the space that surrounds them, almost as if the space were physically connected to them. In the exploration of the space around a young child in the infant toddler-center and preschool, one can notice that a way of living harmoniously forms. Children often look for interactions with elements and aspects as varied as tactile perceptions, color, light, open spaces or obstacles. Exploring through their hands, young children discover the outlines and boundaries of their world. We believe that the body explores with emotions and expression, creativity and communication. These thoughts have oriented our study and experiences in the infant-toddler center and in the preschool as we tried to give more "voice" and explore new perspectives.

### *Neuroscience and the body*

The scientific context offers us possibilities of research and study. Through neuroscience, we learned that movement is at the origin of the formation of thought and gestures are the origin of language. Furthermore, memory is formed in the mind but it is related to the movement of the body, therefore, the memory is also connected with the body. Among the memories and emotions that are important in the construction of language are those connected with muscles and the body.

We can connect what we learn from neuroscience to the theories that guide us, for example, the hundred languages of children. Among the languages, there are emotions and knowledge, which should not be



Is a body something to train, or to listen to and know? Is it a competitive body with abilities to conquer or a body rich in cognitive, emotional and expressive potentialities?

-Cavazzoni, Pini, Porani and Renieri

separated. The body has to enter into the cognitive experiences of the school and listening to the body should be part of the educational project inside and outside the school.

Research in neuroscience offers us new awareness about how children learn and gives us new responsibilities about education as a common construction of meanings and as a permanent process that involves the one who educates and the one who is educated. All of this has a strong relationship with the theory of the hundred languages, which has been for many years the focus of research and continuous experiences in our schools.

The impetus of this research was our desire to update, renew and deepen our experience in the infant toddler-centers and preschools. For many years, we have been in dialogue with the world of the school, of sports and other cultural institutions regarding our view of the child and our view of the body. Is a body something to train, or to listen to and know? Is it a competitive body with abilities to conquer or a body rich in cognitive, emotional and expressive potentialities?

With these considerations, we began to examine our research of the 1970s and 1980s, trying to understand our advances. We also looked at other research, specifically done in relationship with sports. We had always questioned those experiences but never studied them in depth.

There were three aspects to our exploration:

- *the body as language*
- *the body as dance*
- *the connections and hybrids between the language of the body and other languages*

### *The body as language*

The body is the basis for verbal language but it is, in itself, communication and language. The language of the body is always present and inseparable from the words pronounced and expresses itself in many ways: through movements and gestures, through tone of voice, the way of looking, through proximity, through the mimicry and the expressions of the face...all together expressive equipment, with which a very young child is endowed. The body has its own grammar as do many other languages. Children have and use gestural alphabets that become known and recognizable within a group and are used intentionally. Teachers learn to recognize them and, as a result, get to know the children better. We gave a great deal of attention to how movement tells stories about emotions, transformations and characters. We asked ourselves if it is possible to express metaphors with the body.

### *The body and dance*

It was through the body and the dance that we explored those questions. Dance has offered new alphabets to children. Dance gave us the possibility to widen and give power to expressivity, gesture and the language of the body. We saw dance as poetry and, at the same time, the energy and power of the language of the body. We asked ourselves: Can the language of the body favor learning of more formal languages?





### ***Connections between the body and other languages***

We deliberately tried to focus our observation and listening to see how the awareness of the movement and potentials of the body could reciprocally enrich the sensitivity and learning of other languages. Can dance support and favor other languages such as writing and mathematics? We observed the children engaged in exploring dance with their body, and proposed binomials to help adults to have a new way of observing, and to connect experiences and knowledge, in order to see how the research on the movement of the body can also become research on physics, mathematics, expression and construction:

- *the body and measure - the measure of the body.* If we observe very young children, we see that they experiment with their own body through movement, direction, weight, orientation, equilibrium and size.

- *the body and sign - the sign of the body* Drawing and writing are enriched by the expressivity of gestures. The movement of the body can communicate as a verbal language. In the traditional school, being still is required. But movement and dance can make it possible for children to create new communications and new meanings.
- *the language of the body - the body as language* The spoken and written language that is normally learned through words can be enriched through the language of the body.
- *the body and music - the music of the body.* The body is music. The challenge for us and for the children was to be aware, to listen to and to recognize that the body is music.
- *children and dance.* We wanted to make children more aware of the movement of their body, more aware of the beauty of their gestures, and the possibility of the movement and transformations of their body.



Exploring and studying "the body as mind" has given us new ways of looking at educational experiences, as well as opportunities to reflect on languages and environment, and ideas about listening to the child and the children. We have become more aware and sensitive to not *teach* children. Our intent was not to teach dance but to help children to become more aware of listening to their own body in relation to other children's bodies and, above all, to give them the opportunity to recognize with more awareness the multiple alphabets of the body.

## **IL CORPO CHE NARRA...TRASFORMAZIONI** **The Body That Narrates...Transformations**

This project represents an encounter between the world of children and the world of dance. Children and dance do not usually come together in this manner. It is more common for children to attend dance concerts than to participate in their creation. This collaborative initiative, which was nurtured by the culture of childhood in the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, generated a performance based on the children's narration of their bodies. The children were the protagonists and generators of the construction of the choreography performed by the adults, which represented the re-elaboration of the adults' translation of what children narrate with their bodies through the interpretation of three choreographer/dancers of the Compagnia Aterballetto. Based in Reggio Emilia, the Compagnia Aterballetto is the principal company for production and distribution of dance performances in Italy. The company has a vast repertory, with many productions well known at the international level and collaborations with composers, set designers, musicians, painters and actors.

This project involved children together with professional dancers in a unique dialogue that gave a voice to the children as bearers of a strong cultural message. These dancers were not attempting to simulate the children's movements or tell the story for the children. This was a dance of the children, not for the children. The children were the authors of this choreography. This project was in the tradition of the culture of dialogue between the children and the city, and everyone was enriched as a result.

The research of the children, teachers and dancers investigated the grammar and alphabet, the language of the body. This dialogue is not necessarily based on words. Re-occurring features characterize these narratives, which become sharable, recognizable and communicable. Transformation became the content of the narrative and dialogue. Into what did the children transform? The children recognized the great evocative strength and power of animals. Their transformations were experienced in depth, listened to and re-elaborated by the children and then sym-

bolically by the dancers, in how the children became and felt like spiders, lions, dragons, ladybugs...

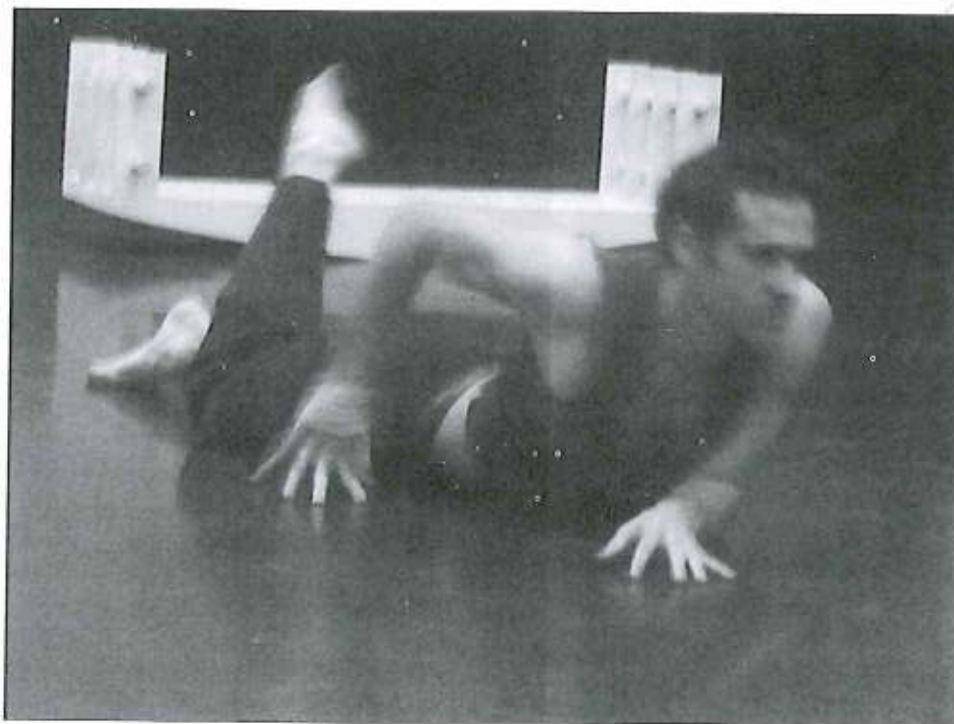
fire  
can be transformed  
into a dragon  
water into fish  
dirt into plants  
air into birds  
*Giacomo, 5 yrs. 3 mos.*

Through this collaboration, the teachers felt that they were enriched by the diverse competencies of the dancers and their ways of seeing the world. They met with the dancers and shared documentation of the children exploring movement. The dancers had an immediate sensibility in regards to the children. The teachers did not have to mediate their dialogue with the children; they only explained their desire to create something together. The dancers did not imitate the children's movements; rather, they attempted to recognize and reinterpret the children's original energy in a different form. As a result, the dancers were able to create a language of dance from the symbols of the children.

The children understood the symbolism of the dialogue. They explored without words, in signs and in movements. It was the choice of the teachers that the children and the dancers explore the movements of their bodies without music, thinking that silence may amplify their gestures. The children recognized their own symbols in the dancers' interpretations. The dancers were able to acknowledge and affirm the children's expression, which sustained their motivation. The children gave suggestions to the dancers in a kind of spiraling process of evaluation.

The choreography that synthesized the dialogue between the children and the dancers was an experience co-produced by Reggio Children and Compagnia Aterballetto, and was first presented for the children, teachers and families at Choreia who participated in this research, and then for all the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. "The Body That Narrates...Transformations" debuted in May 2004 during the Reggio Emilia Festival of Dance and is currently included in a number of national children's theater series in other Italian cities. The didactic project and the performance have been presented in professional development contexts at the national and international levels, including the conference "Crossing Boundaries" in February 2004, and in pro-

fessional development initiatives for teachers and *atelieristi* promoted by Reggio Children. The performance is accompanied by an exhibit curated by the Choreia preschool that uses images, words, graphics and video to document the children's creative processes and their narrations in body movement that generated the choreography.



## INTERVIEW WITH PAOLA CAVAZZONI, BARBARA PINI AND FRANCESCA BIANCHI

By Lella Gandini and Judith Allen Kaminsky

**PAOLA:** Through this project, we wanted to make a connection between education, and the arts and culture through the children's exploration of their bodies. This encounter between children and dancers was a way of being very close with the children while interpreting their physical movement, and also the symbols and metaphors of that movement. The dancers really immersed themselves in observing and interacting with the children so that they were able to re-interpret and transform their movement. The children were interested in the process of transforming their movement and they were aware of this transformation. As a result of the interaction between the children and the dancers, the children created drawings that were metaphors of the animals their movements represented.

**LELLA:** The children expressed their transformation into animals with very beautiful and poetic words. They described the energy that was inside their bodies, in their heart or legs. For example, "happiness comes from your legs" and "rage comes from your belly." But it is interesting that they did not actually draw animals; instead they drew abstract images. How did the teachers react to these abstract drawings?

**P:** We thought about asking the children why they decided not to draw the actual animals but then we decided to welcome their choice.

**FRANCESCA:** The children described what they were drawing. They described abstract representations like darkness as a very dark mark where the





transformation to animals was beginning or where it was at its maximum intensity.

**L:** The children used these drawings to create a kind of circular map for the dancers to follow. The map was designed so that once the dancers reached the end, they would begin again.

**P:** This process led us to realize the sense of circularity between these two creative places, the school of young children and the dance theater. This collaboration did not teach us the technique of dance but, rather, a new way of working with children and a new way for children to learn. As a result of this experience, we found a new way to listen to children through a different approach to interpreting the context of children, the space and how we prepare it for them. In order for the dancers to transform the children's movement into dance, they had to really understand the movement of children, which we believe represents the origins of human movement.

**L:** In schools in the United States, there is a fixed time for recess when the children play in an active way. When the children grow up, they participate in sports. This time is considered to be separate from learning in school yet movement can be very connected to cognitive learning.

**P:** There is also that perception in Italy, of thinking about movement as something outside of the school.

**L:** In organized sports, children learn skills in competition with others. Yet during this project, one child was very expressive about the rage of a lion and was nose to nose with another child, who was expressing an emotion just as intense. But these children seemed to trust each other so they were able to act out these charges of energy without a negative result.

**P:** We are often asked how the children could do all these movements without hurting one another. We believe that this has something to do with the human relationships of understanding and friendship that have developed inside the schools. We encourage children to have solidarity with one another. The children learned a great deal about one another through this experience.

The parents' understanding and participation in this project was also instrumental to its progression. We had already established a laboratory of movement at Choreia on Saturday mornings, when parents and children move together in the space. Through this experience, we became aware that often the movement of young children makes parents uneasy. We realized that when parents bring their child to the infant-toddler center, they know a lot about the body of the child and talk enthusiastically about what the child can do. But when the child is brought to the preschool, the parents often say, "He cannot be still" or "He moves all the time" or "He moves too much." There is this sense of uneasiness about the movement of preschool children, so we tried to help parents enjoy contact with the body of the child at play and in movement during this laboratory of movement. The parents expressed concern that the children would go to first grade with a lot of knowledge about their bodies but not enough knowledge about literacy. But through this experience, the children had the opportunity to describe their movement with words and their expressions were quite eloquent.

It was necessary for us to establish a thesis that would guide our research and would give us an extra lens, through which to look. We decided to look at the body as music, to look at gesture as a composition of music and the potential of the body to compose gestures. When people saw the performance presented with music, they asked who composed the music and how we'd chosen the music. But during the initial exploration of the children and the dancers, the choice was not to have music so that we could really listen to the body in movement, so that the people who were observing the children could concentrate more fully. The choice of silence put more value in the gestures of the children.

Consider the newborn child and the rhythm of the heartbeat, for example. There are certain aspects of the body that have a harmony, which is a composition of the body itself. Our decision was to look at the body as part of the mind rather than separate from the mind. Research in neuroscience concerning brain formation and brain waves supports this idea of the rhythm of the body.

**L:** I like the idea that the origin of the mind is through movement.



**P:** In neuroscience, movement is seen as a basis of thought and also the basis of the formation of language. Movement, thought and language are seen as a sort of sequence of development. Learning about the movement of the body creates a kind of memory for the children, on which they can build their skills and their developmental steps. This fits perfectly with the idea of the hundred languages of children.

**L:** Loris dreamed of a school made of many laboratories. The *atelier* in Reggio has slowly included more than just visual languages.

**P:** At Choreia, there has been a deliberate choice to bring the body inside the *atelier*. This confirms our tendency to not separate different fields of knowledge, and to not separate the body and the mind. What we've done here is to see how one language nourishes another language. In this case, we considered the language of the body and the graphic language together, graphic representation of movement, words and language. We saw description as a transformation. We used transformation as a key. The children described and drew representations of transformation and the energy inside them. By going from movement to graphic expression, the children were able to express and capture a memory of what happened through the language of the drawing.

The dancers used various materials and languages like light and shadow but they also followed the design of the map that the children created while seeking to answer the questions, "How can the body narrate? How can the body be transformed? What kind of grammar and what kind of movement can be used?"



**Barbara:** We used small photographs of the movement of the children's faces and their bodies' expressions, which became signs that were readable by others. These photographs also became part of the language that could be recognized and put together to create a narration of the children's memory. The children gave names to the expressions of their face and body, such as:

"a tired sign"

"the trembling transformation"

"light transformation"

"the brain and the cells"

Then the children combined all these expressions into a map of transformations, which was placed on a very large canvas, and the dancers followed it. The map represented a circle that never ends. Where there was a pause in the movement, the children said that this is when the body decides how it is going to be transformed. This big map then became the choreography of the dance performance.

This was a dialogue of movement between the children, who were representing animals, and the dancers, who were interpreting their movement. The children described this "dialogue between signs" in different ways and they recognized their own signs in the dancers' interpretations.



"a labyrinth of tail"  
"an agitated tail"  
"dancing lion tail"  
"tired tail"

"laughing tail"  
"friendly tails"  
"knotted tail"

"immobile eyes"  
"poisonous eyes"

"nice eyes"

"mixed claws"  
"stinging talons"

"curled talon"  
"melted hands"

"the nails of a hungry lion"  
"mommy lion"  
"the lion that moves you"  
"thirsty lion"  
"powerful roaring"

"half a mouth"  
"dancing mouth"

"not angry jaws"  
"kiss"



**L:** Was there an introduction to the dance performance?

**P:** At each performance, we distributed a brochure about the project and there was also an exhibit in the school or theater. We suggested to the dancers to have an introduction that explained the process of the experience but they believed that the choreography would tell the story.

**B:** The exhibit included the teachers' and children's thoughts, words and drawings regarding this study of movement. There was a video of the interaction of the dancers and children. There was also an interactive exhibit for the children who attended, so they could leave some traces of their movements.

